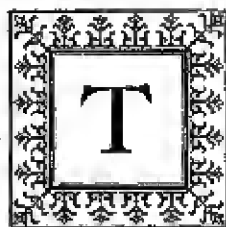


Joyce

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY REGINALD BIRCH



HEY met at a dance. She was taken to it by the Daltons, who lived in a flat lower down. They had only met her in the lift, but she attracted them—

twenty-one, pretty and slim, blue eyes, brown hair, and the freshness of youth. It struck them that she didn't get much out of life, for they never saw her with any one of her own age, and her mother looked cross and tiresome. One day a girl they were to have taken to a charity dance annoyed them by crying off at the last minute. They discussed what could be done while they waited for the lift from the top floor. It arrived with Joyce Lawson in it, looking her prettiest. Suddenly an idea occurred to them. They offered to take her.

"A dance!" Her face lighted up. "I should adore it." Then her thoughts taking a natural course, she added doubtfully: "If I can—I am not a bit smart. I should have to dig up my one and only frock and see if it would do."

Anything would do, they told her. She was sure to look nice.

When she went up in the lift again, she felt as if she landed in the seventh heaven.

John Dacres was at the dance—thirty-three, fairly tall, clean-shaven, thoughtful-looking. He had bought a ticket from Dalton, who was interested in the charity, and went for half an hour to look on, but he didn't dance. He was rather bored when Joyce was hurled at him—till he saw her pale little face and blue eyes, eager and half-frightened, and the pretty hair twisted round her head. He took her to be younger than she was, and felt that he ought to be agreeable.

"Do you mind sitting out?" he asked.

"Oh, no"—with a long-drawn sigh of content, for anything pleased her on this wonderful night. They went to a bal-

cony, and gradually he drew from her the scanty details of her every-day life.

"It must be dull for you," he said, "if you have no intimate friends in London and your mother is not able to go about with you."

"But it is dull for mother, too."

He thought her answer tender and not too gushing. "I suppose you have books?"

"Very few. I don't think I care for reading much. When I'm not doing anything, I mean things for mother, I look out of the window."

"Look out of the window?"

She nodded. "We are very high up, and no one can see me; I like to wonder who all the people are and where they are going, and wish I could go with them; sometimes I pretend I do."

"And where do you generally arrive?"

"Nowhere. They seem to go on into distances in which there isn't anything at all that I know about—isn't it foolish?"

"No, not foolish." He put more meaning to it than it had, for it seemed imaginative to him. "It's a way sometimes to undiscovered countries."

She didn't understand, and she was puzzled by the way he looked at her, as if he were sorry for her, but not much entertained. Luckily a partner appeared and hurriedly claimed her; so she gave herself up to the excitement of the dance. She had not been to one since the summer she was seventeen, when she had stayed with her mother at a hydro in Wales. It had rained nearly all the time and they had sat indoors, but there had been one or two balls at the Assembly Rooms a mile off, and a party of young people went to them while their elders stayed at home. Her mother let her go with reluctance and only because the doctor insisted. She remembered the young man, something like the one she was with now, with whom she had danced the "Sun-

shine" waltz. Luckily it was one of the few fine nights; they wandered in the garden and he kissed her. She couldn't think how he came to do it. "You are awfully nice, you know. I believe I could fall in love with you," he said. Then they went back to the ballroom; and she never saw him again. . . . She wished the band would play that waltz now. There was no garden, but there was something magical in a dance; she felt as if it might be a conjuring trick that changed the whole world. She was almost afraid to remember that when it was over she would have to go back to the top flat and the irritable, silent mother sitting by the fire.

John Dacres went home thinking of a book he wanted to finish, for in the evening he did some rather stolid criticism; in the daytime he was a permanent official of minor importance. Work interested him more than anything else. He was bored by theatres and the usual entertainments of London. He dined at his club occasionally, and did a little golf on Saturdays and Sundays. His sisters were married and lived long distances off. He had no other relations and few friends. He cared nothing for women. There were stray men he had known at Harrow or Oxford who turned up now and then, and even dined with him. They called him "good old Dacres" and thought him too stodgy for frequent use. He had a house and three old-fashioned servants in Victoria Road, Kensington, and never worried about the future. Marriage? He shook his head when any idea of it occurred to him or one of his sisters suggested it in a letter; it would upset the place, the quiet rooms, the methodical servants. Besides he didn't know any one, he never fell in love: it was not in his line.

He forgot Joyce Lawson, except just once or twice in the week after the charity dance, when he had a vision of a girl sitting at a window, high up in a block of flats, watching the people on the roadway beneath. "I'll go by, if I think of it, and look up; strange things girls are," he said to himself, and forgot her again. One day he met the Daltons at Charing Cross Station, just going off to Italy.

"How is Miss"—he wasn't even sure

of her name—"the girl you took with you to that dance?" he asked.

"Oh, poor little thing, you mean Joyce Lawson. I am so sorry for her. Her mother died yesterday, and we were so busy that we had no time to do anything for her; but we never saw them, except in the lift, and knew nothing about them."

"I suppose she has relations."

"I don't believe she has."

"Is she all alone?" Suddenly a remembrance of the lonely life she had pictured to him flashed back.

"I expect so. We heard that they never had any visitors, and the old servant looks rather sullen."

"Is there anything one could do for her?"

"I don't think so. You might take her some flowers. Do. It would ease my conscience. I meant to get her some, but hadn't a moment. It's the flat at the very top, above ours," Mrs. Dalton said it over her shoulder as they hurried to their train.

Flowers? He was rather bothered at the suggestion. After all, he had only seen her once, and he felt that she might resent them as an intrusion. But she haunted him through the hours at his office, and when he left it in the afternoon he was possessed by her. A girl of one-and-twenty—he didn't believe she was as old—she didn't look it—alone with her dead mother, and in a top flat, so that not even a footstep passed her door. . . . Of course, she had telegraphed for country friends . . . they might not have come yet . . . to do nothing would be rather brutal. . . . He bought some roses, and went up in the lift. Then he hesitated—but of course he was only going to give them in to the servant. He knocked, and waited a long time; his courage ebbed; then she opened the door herself.

In the dim light her face looked white and thin. She had evidently been crying, and her pretty hair was rumpled, as if it had been buried in a cushion. "Oh!" She stood still, sadly staring at him, but she remembered him after a moment. "Mr. Dacres!"

"I am sorry," he said awkwardly. "I didn't mean you to see me."

"It's such a relief," she whispered, as if afraid to raise her voice. "I am all

alone and so unhappy. Parker—she is the maid—has gone out to get some things."

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I meant to leave these without your seeing me—just a few roses."

She took the white package and put her little nose down as if to smell them through the paper. "It's so kind of you," she said. "And, oh, do come in. It's getting dark."

"I think not—now."

"Oh, do," she entreated. "I am alone and—" She shivered.

She made way for him, and they entered together a rather dreary little sitting-room. He stood just a yard or two inside for a minute, saying commonplace, and remembering a book he had read lately about death being only sad to those who were left; he tried to quote it in a sympathetic voice. She looked up at him, with a dazed expression. His manner was rather severe and aloof, but it was kind and protecting, and she was so relieved to see him. "I'm frightened," she said, still in a whisper, and nodded toward the dim passage. There was a closed door at the end.

"You are not afraid of your mother?" he asked gently.

"I am—she looks so remote . . . I never saw any one before . . . and the room feels different." She shivered again. "It is full of silence; everything in it seems to know—I can't bear it! Do stay till Parker comes—she will be here directly."

Of course he stayed. He sat down and watched the bowed head and locked hands on the sofa. She was shudderingly silent, and he could think of nothing more to say. Then Parker let herself in with a latch-key. She came at once to the sitting-room and stood in the doorway, looking at them with surprise, a tall, gaunt woman with a hard face and sullen manner. "I didn't think any one was coming," she said.

The girl raised her head. "I asked Mr. Dacres to stay till you came back," she explained, as if she feared being called to account. "He has brought me some roses."

He got up to go. Parker retreated to the front door. "If I could be of any use

—could do anything. But you have relations who will be with you?"

She shook her head. "There isn't anybody except Aunt Henrietta, who has telegraphed that she can't come to London—it gives her neuritis. And Ella—Ella is her daughter—is away."

"But who will manage for you here?"

"Parker will, I suppose—she has been with us three years—and the lawyer; he is very kind. There isn't any one else." It was almost an appeal.

He hesitated. "You will go to your aunt presently?"

"No," she answered quickly.

He felt embarrassed. He was sorry for her, but he didn't want to mix himself up with her affairs. She was outside his track. While he was considering how he could depart without seeming unsympathetic, she said with sudden vehemence:

"I can't go to Aunt Henrietta; she was never kind to me, and Ella is dreadful. And there's no one to advise me—or anything."

"I am awfully sorry—if I could be of any use—" he repeated vaguely.

Parker, who knew nothing of the stranger, came to the doorway again. There was dismissal in her manner. Then the white face looked up. "Do come again," she said. "It has been such a help."

"Of course I will," he answered, and hated himself for the hesitation he feared she detected.

All the way home he felt as if a sense of responsibility had stolen up to him. And there was no forgetting her. He thought of her rumpled hair, her white face, her shrinking, and the entreaty in her voice. He wondered what she would do, if she had any money, and whether Parker would stick to her like a grim but faithful dragon; but even then she could hardly go on living in that dismal top flat.

At the end of ten days he felt that things must have somehow adjusted themselves, and to stay away longer would look as if he shirked going. He took her two little books, one hidden in each side pocket, lest a propitious moment in which to give them did not occur. They were "Green Mansions" and "The Road Mender"—nature studies, and not

too frivolous. Reading was the mainstay of his own life, but he felt she would not look at anything very serious. He could think of no other gift; chocolates did not occur to him, and there was something foppish to his mind in carrying flowers. He had done it last time, but that was different.

She was better, evidently glad to see him, and she was certainly pretty; the experiences she had been going through had put more expression into her face. She gave him some tea, which Parker brought in reluctantly, as if she thought it rather soon to be having a visitor—of the other sex, too; but this did not occur to him. When the tea had been taken away, he brought out the two books. She was pleased at having a gift, and smiled as she turned over the leaves.

"They look very nice," she said. It was not quite the right adjective, of course; but it didn't matter. She was so young; by and by she would know better. This was unadulterated youth: he had seen so little of it before. While she was interested in the books, he looked at the shelf in the corner—a single shelf, and a miscellaneous collection: two or three volumes of sermons, some essays, Tennyson's poems, and a few old-fashioned novels. He wondered if she had read anything else.

"These were your mother's?" he said.

She nodded. "I used to read to her sometimes," with a sigh that he misunderstood.

"You miss her very much, I'm afraid."

She shook her head. "Perhaps—but I wish I grieved more—I feel so wicked not to. I try—but I can't." She got up and stood by the mantelpiece. "It's Ella's fault—she told me—when I was little, too. It was so cruel. I have always hated her for it."

"What did she tell you?"

"That mother didn't love me. She never loved father. She only married him out of pique, and Aunt Henrietta couldn't forgive it. Aunt Henrietta was father's sister. . . . Mother brooded all her life, and said father was a stranger—always a stranger; he had done something that made her dislike him, and she didn't like me because I was father's child—she told Aunt Henrietta so. She seemed to

shrink from me sometimes. I was afraid of her—that's why I didn't love her much. I knew I was in her way." She was almost passionate with miserable remembrance. "The man who treated her badly died; perhaps she went to him, for she looked so content. . . . She had been waiting—she was glad to go. She had never wanted me, and she has quite forgotten me now—she never looks back for a single moment, or cares—poor mother," she added, with a far-off look in her blue eyes. "Perhaps she is happy at last—that's why I can't grieve for her."

"When did your father die?"

"Oh, years ago. I don't even remember him."

He thought for a moment. "But why shouldn't your father's relations be kind to you?"

"Oh, no." She shuddered. "Ella called mother 'that woman' once. I heard her; and it was she who told me about everything. I can't grieve for mother, but I hate them for their cruelty to her, and I think they hate me because I was her child."

There was a long silence before he asked: "What will you do—with yourself?"

"I don't know yet."

"There is Parker——"

"She is going to her son at Durham. I don't want to be with her; she is always cross, and only stayed because she thought it couldn't be long. I must go away from this flat. There won't be enough money to pay for it now mother's pension is over, but I don't know where I shall go."

"You might find some work," he ventured. "Girls do so many things now. It would fill your life."

"I am not clever. I don't know how to do anything—I mean anything that could be paid for; and I want to feel free. I never have been that, and never went anywhere alone."

"Do you want to go—anywhere alone?"

"Yes—yes"—with a long-drawn sigh.

"You would be very lonely."

"But I have always been lonely."

"You seemed happy that night at the dance. I watched you for a minute or two after our talk."



Drawn by Reginald Birch.

The girl raised her head. "I asked Mr. Dacres to stay till you came back."—Page 295.

She nodded. "I felt that I was wanted. First, when the Daltons asked me to go, and then when I got there—only by my partners, you know; but I felt wanted, just as I did at the hydro in Wales, when I went to dances there. It was only for an hour or two then; but I have never been wanted at all anywhere else, and yet I have never been free. Now I am—" She broke off and shuddered. "It haunts me so that I didn't care enough for mother. You see, she wasn't like the mothers one reads of in books; she made me feel that she only did things for me because it was a duty, and I resented it so—it was wicked of me, but I did," she added doggedly.

Parker entered and looked at them. "Miss Joyce," she said almost roughly, "the lawyer will be here soon and you've got to be ready for him. This Mrs. Thornton may be coming too."

He was glad to be extricated from a difficult situation. "I'm going," he said. "But Mrs. Thornton—is she a friend?"

"Oh, no. I have never seen her. She is a friend of Mr. Burt's, the lawyer, and she may take the flat. She is coming up from Devonshire to-day."

"I see. . . . Good-by." He said it as if it were final—she felt it. "I wish I could have been of some service to you," he added.

"But you will come again?" There was something like desperation in her voice that arrested him.

"I will if you wish it"—

Then Parker interposed. "It had better not be this week; there's plenty to do—and no time for visitors," she added disagreeably.

"There is," Joyce flashed. After all, there was fire hidden in her somewhere. "Do come. It won't matter to Parker."

"Visitors annoy me," the woman muttered.

"I'll come next week," he said. "Good-by till—till, let's say, Tuesday." He felt like a straw to a drowning woman.

Parker followed him with heavy footsteps to the outer door. He heard her lock it after him with what sounded like malicious determination to keep him away. "I believe that woman bullies her," he thought as he walked home.

There was more in the girl than he had imagined, but she was curiously deficient in sentiment. He disliked sentiment, he had none himself—at least he thought so—but it seemed unnatural that a woman should be without it; he had imagined, too, that relationship was a net in which the affections, of girls especially, were inevitably entangled. She had spoken of her mother with sympathy, with pity, but with so much detachment that for an hour or two it repelled him. He wished he could shake her off. "But that would be rather unfair," he thought later. "She is so young to be alone, and may come to all sorts of grief if she doesn't look out." He did no work that evening, and the days of the week dragged by, while more and more insistently Joyce Lawson came into them.

Monday at last—the day before he was going to see her again. All the evening he sat thinking out plans for her, building up possible futures. He wished he knew how much money she had; he imagined that it could not be much, for it was a small top flat and there were no signs of affluence or luxury about it; moreover, she had spoken of a pension that ended with her mother. He wanted horribly to do something for her, something that would arrange her life satisfactorily. Money he could give her, of course—he was a generous man and would gladly have given it—but it might not be necessary, and anyhow it would be difficult. Besides, it was a home she wanted—and happiness. It hurt him to feel how much she must long for happiness. Obviously, she had never known it. A stray gasp or two of pleasurable excitement—that had been all her share; she had apparently never really had even a comfortable home. He looked round his study. He thought of the dining-room, and the one place laid for dinner, of the little-used drawing-room up-stairs. "There would be plenty of room for her here, but that would never do." He was amused for a moment while he imagined her going up and down the quiet staircase, or sitting on the opposite side of the fire. He shook his head. He had lived so long alone, it would be too strange. Besides, after all, she was not a child. She was twenty-one . . . old enough to be married, but he didn't want

to marry her; he was not in love with her, nor she with him. It would be a solution, of course, but he didn't think it was one that she would admit, nor that he could face. She was not like a girl one would expect to fall in love with—and he didn't believe that sort of thing had entered her head. She was merely a forlorn little thing, with not much in her, who had been snubbed or bullied all her life, who knew nothing of the world, and wanted to escape from her gloomy surroundings into some better atmosphere. It was no use thinking about it; he didn't see a way out for her. If she had been five-and-twenty it would have been so much easier. He turned to his work, but still Joyce Lawson haunted him . . . such a little white face, and such sad, appealing blue eyes . . . they had charming lashes, he remembered, though he did not know before that he had noticed them . . . pretty hair, too—he liked the rumpled state he had seen it in. Poor little girl, she was rather a little idiot. But she would develop; she was so young. He wondered what would have happened to her by to-morrow, and if she would look up with that little fleeting smile of hers, as if she sheltered herself in his strength. . . .

The lift was out of order. He had to walk up-stairs. When he was nearly at the top a woman with a long gray veil thrown back from a close-fitting bonnet passed him on her way downward. She had large shining eyes, a grave face, thin and very sweet—the eyes and face of a visionary. She looked at him, and he felt that an unasked question was on her lips, but she made no pause or sign, and in a moment she had vanished. Parker opened the door before he could knock. "I heard you coming," she said, and led the way to the drawing-room. "She'll be here when she's taken off her things. She was out when that woman came, and they've been talking every since she was back." She entered with him and, shutting the door, stood with her back to it, looking at him with an expression of disagreeable exultation. "We've sold the flat," she said, "lease and furniture—everything just as it stands—and we have got to turn out this week. I'm going to Durham, on Saturday."

"And Miss Lawson? Where is she going?"

"I don't know. I can't have her with me; there's my son to look after. She's got all sorts of silly notions; she ought to go to her relations, but she won't hear of it."

"She doesn't like them."

"Lots of us don't like relations, but we have to put up with them. I think you had better talk to her. I shall be gone, so it's nothing to me, but there's one thing I want to say, and that is if you don't mean anything you had better leave her alone. I don't hold with men hanging about—here she is."

He was astounded, but it was impossible to answer, for Joyce entered, and Parker hurriedly vanished.

He looked at her and suddenly his heart went out to her—a slip of a girl in a plain, dull, black frock—very grave, but content. A change had come over her. In her eyes there was an expression that seemed like a reflection of the strange woman's. From sheer bewilderment he held the soft hand a moment longer than was necessary, but it had no visible effect on her.

"We are going away," she said, as if she hardly believed it. "I'm so glad you have come, for in a few days I shall be gone." She stopped, crossed to the sofa and sat down, waiting for him to speak.

"Parker told me. And that she goes to her son. But you?"

"I shall go away—quite a way from London. I want to think a great deal—to be different."

"Yes?" he said doubtfully, "and you can—you have somewhere to go?"

"Oh, yes, it is all arranged," she added with a sigh of content.

He wondered if she meant some place abroad, and he thought of the money it would cost.

"And you could manage it all?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "for I shall be richer than I expected. I shall have nearly two hundred a year, and there will be six hundred pounds directly for this flat—but I shall not go to the end of the world; to North Devon, perhaps. She said it was beautiful, and by the sea."

"She? Who said it?"

"Mrs. Thornton, the woman who has bought this flat." She looked up with a little dreamy smile. "She knows about so many things. Mr. Burt brought her the other night. I have only seen her three times, but she has set me thinking, and she has made the whole world different." For a moment a horrible idea possessed him. Could it be that the strange woman was a psycho-analyst? He hated the whole gang; Freud and Jung were maniacs or impostors to him, who veiled indecencies with obscurities. "Did she talk about psycho-analysis?" he asked coldly.

She looked at him bewildered. "I don't know anything about that. What is it?"

"You needn't know anything about it, dear child."

She turned her head a little toward the scanty blaze at the last two words and asked: "But what does it mean? What did you call it?" She didn't even know the word; he loved her for it.

"It means self-consciousness and morbidity; everlasting introspection, and self-contemplation. Their stuff annoys me more than I can say." He tried to laugh it off. "People should forget themselves, not sit and gloat over their inner consciousness." He tried to pass it off and asked in a different voice: "She didn't talk to you about that sort of thing?"

She looked at him, and he saw the blueness of her innocent eyes; then away into the fire again—her hands still crossed on her lap in the way she had while she spoke: "She said she could divine things and could see that I was desolate, but it was my own fault, for I had starved my soul."

"What did she mean?" He was still suspicious.

"She said that when a child was born its mother nourished it and clothed it and taught it to walk and speak, did everything for its body, to keep life in it—good, healthy life. But we had to do the rest for ourselves, to nourish our souls, to clothe them with thought and knowledge and especially with love and the memory of work—work done for others, or for the world, and then it safeguarded us with patience and courage and understanding, and out of it happiness grew. And if we didn't do this, consciously or unconscious-

ly, the evil influences came and disfigured us."

She was evidently trying to repeat the words she had heard, but she was confused, as if she saw them written up, and only read them through a mist. "She said I had starved my soul, she could see it, and if I had not done wrong things, it was only because I had not had the chance of doing them."

"Perhaps you have not had the chance of doing anything at all, one way or the other."

She took no notice of the interruption and went on. "She said I ought to have felt it, while I was living with mother, all the years since I was born; but how could I—I knew nothing—no one cared for me or taught me, how could I know? Now I shall go away for a little while into a distance and think it out in some place that is beautiful. She said that would be the wisest thing to do; and the world itself is so beautiful that if I let my eyes see and my ears hear, my soul would steal out and sun itself, and the beauty of the world would nourish it and warmth would come into my heart, and I should learn to love it—as something that was my own. And when I did, I should love the people in it and feel for them, and long to serve them, to do things for them, that would give them happiness—for if one's heart and soul were saturated with beauty, one gave it out and helped to make a whole with nature."

"She belonged to some form of Pantheism," he said to himself rather than to Joyce.

She went on as if she had not heard him. "I have been waiting all my life for a door to open, to go through it into some different part of the world. I feel as if I had beaten at the door of it with my hands; and if, after mother died, I had stayed on here I should have died, too, of starvation as I think now that she did—perhaps of starvation for love—No one loved her, not even I." There were tears falling slowly down her face, but she did not know it. "She made me feel that I had been no good to any one, done nothing—nothing. But I will. . . . I have been waiting . . . she said every one could do something for the world, love or work, or give it some happiness for others

to use, and that if it were ever so little it gave one a right to live under its sky and to tread its ground—for even the least of us had a share in the world; it was a divine inheritance, to use well or ill. I shall go away and seek for my share."

She gave a long sigh as if she were rested already. "If I had only known it before, everything would have been so different," she seemed to be speaking into a distance rather than to him—into one of the distances of which she had spoken at the dance.

He got up and went over to her. "You can't go alone," he said. "Let me go with you and seek for my share?"

She drew back. "I want to go alone—I must."

"Why shouldn't I marry you, then we might fight out things together?"

She stood up and looked searchingly at his face. "Oh, no, I couldn't," she said with low determination. "Besides, you don't like me very much. You are sorry for me—but you need not be now—you were shocked the last time you were here, I felt it. You went away disliking me."

"I love you to-day and I want you—I want to take you away and marry you."

He put his arm round her and softly kissed her cheek—just once, as he might have kissed a child.

She drew back, without any sign of response or resentment. "I am glad you did that," she said; "for you have been so good to me; but I couldn't marry you, it has made me feel it—I couldn't," she seemed almost frightened.

He looked at her puzzled, as well as rebuffed, then he remembered the twelve years' difference between them. "I am much older than you," he began.

"I know, it has helped me. I can't think what I should have done if you hadn't come when you did. But I don't want you to marry me. I couldn't bear it."

"But why couldn't you?"

"I don't want to tell you—please go away—let me be alone." There were tears in her eyes. She held out her hands. He kissed them, and rested his face for a moment on the soft cool palms; he felt them tremble. "Dear child," he said, "I don't want to distress you." Then

without another word he turned away, let himself out, and went down the long staircase feeling that he had left behind a mystery, a symbol, perhaps, that held the secret of his future.

"I am a conceited ass—for somehow I thought that she cared for me," he told himself as he walked home. "But it's no use worrying her. I have just got to put up with it."

The house at Kensington seemed very silent as he entered. There was a fire burning in his study, some books on the writing-table had come while he was absent, an evening paper was on the arm of the chair. It all looked comfortable and homelike. "I believe she could have been content here," he thought. "However, it's no good, perhaps it's as well."

A month later—two months. He had no news of her, nothing happened, his days went by in the precise order they had done for years. But gradually there came to him a sense that the house was waiting, that it had been starved, too. He felt it every time he passed the doors of the rooms that might have held human happiness. He had lived a life of routine; if other things had been within his reach they had passed him and gone on. He had money enough for comfort, an easy post, he did some criticism for a literary journal because it interested him, but that dozens of other men, worse off, could have done equally well, that was all. For the first time this occurred to him, because of what little Joyce had said. (He called her "little Joyce" in his thoughts, and she was always in them, or at the back of them). "I don't even collect coins or china to leave to a museum, or keep a dog or a horse," he said with a grim smile; "not that that would redound to my credit." He thought over his life; it had been comfortable and without shocks. He had travelled a good deal on well-beaten tracks, but only for his own satisfaction; he had gone alone, made no acquaintance, gathered no results from his observations. . . . He turned to his table, one of the books waiting to be reviewed was on Waste Products. "I am one myself," he thought. "But after all there are thousands of cumberers like me, and the world would

be a gaping nuisance if it were filled solely with a crowd forever up and doing." Still, it worried him that he was not getting enough out of it himself—nor it of him. He knew a good deal one way and the other, but it was locked up, and the key to its hiding-place was seldom exercised. He was capable of emotion, of affection, even of passion, as all men are; but he had no goal of any sort, and he had shirked human obligations. Gradually he came to feel that, as Joyce had put it, his life was starved, too, on one side of it at any rate. "But I'm becoming morbid," he thought, "doing psycho-analysis on myself," he kicked away an imaginary something. "It would be much better to take a long walk and make love to a pretty woman. More natural, and wholesome exercise." Make love? He was not sure that he knew how; he had never been good at small talk or paying little attentions—after all he was a lazy beggar and self-centred. Perhaps that was why Joyce had refused him. Somehow she had found him out. Joyce! She said that the woman who passed him on the stairs had made the whole world different for her. Joyce was making it different for him. He was beginning to feel that he couldn't go on much longer without seeing her. It was ridiculous, but he believed he had fallen in love at last with a little white-faced girl with a soft voice and blue eyes, to whom he had felt vastly superior at the dance, and had only pitied when he found her in the top flat, while her mother was lying dead.

The winter had gone. There were violets and primroses heaping the baskets of the women by Kensington Station. There were spring flowers, of course, in the hedges of the countryside where Joyce had gone. She was a springtime girl herself, unconsciously waiting for her summer. He was rather pleased with the idea. . . . And it was all very well, but he was going to find out where she was. Some one at the flat would know.

A strange servant opened the door. Miss Lawson's address? She would go and ask, and left him in the little hall. It looked more comfortable than when he had seen it last, as if it belonged to a different manner of home. . . . Mrs.

Thornton would like to see him. . . . He followed the maid to the little sitting-room he remembered. It was transformed too: books and etchings, a different sofa with many cushions, a writing-table with a shaded lamp, and various signs of comfort. A tall woman in black rose from the writing-table—her face was grave and sweet, just as he had seen it that day on the stairs. She had quantities of gray hair; soft lace fell from it and from her throat. He felt her fascination in a moment, her magnetism, just as Joyce had done.

"You are Mr. Dacres," she said. "We passed each other one day—I heard about you, from Joyce Lawson."

"May I know where she is?" he asked, when he had made his apologies for intruding. "I should like to write to her," he looked at her and gathered courage. "I want to see her again."

She smiled as if she knew. . . .

"She is in North Devon—at Lynmouth. Do you know it?"

"No. I have often heard of Lynton."

"Lynton is on a height, and fashionable. Lynmouth is immediately beneath it. It is very small and quiet and reaches to the sea. It is soft and springlike there now—the trees and the flowers are coming out."

"Is she alone?"

"Yes—with an old servant of mine. I have lent her my cottage by the harbor till Easter—a month yet, isn't it?"

"How kind you have been to her!"

"I knew a great deal about her, poor little girl, from Mr. Burt, who is a friend of mine. He was sorry for her; the mother was a strange, morose woman. When she had gone he asked me to come and see her. I wanted a little flat in town, and she was glad to let me have this."

He hesitated before he asked: "Do you think I might go and see her?"

She looked at him for a moment; he felt as if she knew every thought he had. "I think you might," she hesitated, then she asked: "Are you fond of her?"

"I love her," he said simply. "But she wouldn't have anything to say to me."

It seemed to amuse her. "I think I know about you," she told him presently.



Drawn by Reginald Birch.

"It has been growing on me every day—since I saw you last—you are simply the world to me."—Page 305.

"Your father was General Dacres—he died in South Africa?"

"Yes, that's it—a splendid fellow, but it doesn't make me any better, nor Joyce inclined to have anything to say to me. You told her that her soul was starved. I think mine has been starved, too, but it's my own fault. I have done some work that any one else could do, and would probably be glad to do, if I were out of the way; but no one is a bit the better because I am alive, and I don't believe I ever gave a day's happiness to any one in my life." He felt as if he had come to confession.

She liked him for it. "You were a great help to that child when she had no one else near her."

It swept over him that perhaps that was why he loved her, and for the first time in his life he dimly realized the blessedness of serving. "I wish I could think that," he said awkwardly; "I did nothing really—though I believe I would do anything in the world for her." The color mounted to his face, for he had not meant to say so much.

Again just as if she understood all that was in his rather simple heart, Mrs. Thornton held out her hand and smiled again.

The beauty of Lynmouth took him by surprise. He arrived in the twilight. The hills that guarded it from the outer world looked like mountains, and the dwellings, half hidden on their wooded sides and only betrayed here and there by the redness of a roof or, as the shadows deepened, the twinkling of a light, gave the place a foreign air. In the little harbor were sailing-boats and fishing-craft that might have been Italian. Facing the harbor was a gentle slope, called Mars Hill, going up from the water's edge, and on it, closely grouped together, were half a dozen Old World little houses or cottages. They had forecourts, only wide enough to hold some clumps of flowers, and low gates. Some of the roofs were thatched, and over their fronts creepers and honeysuckle spread, and climbing rose-trees that presently would cover them with bloom. They looked in at the casement windows and almost smothered the doorways. He ascertained which was Mrs. Thornton's

house—it was on Mars Hill—then went for a stroll while he considered what he would do about Joyce. She had refused him once, she might do it again, and he wondered whether she would be happy if he married her. She was setting out on her way through the world, he might not be able to keep pace with her, she had led such a methodical life, too; when she found things out a bit, she might not be satisfied. . . . He imagined her in the quiet Kensington house—and the closed rooms open—and all he might do to make her happy. He would take her to Italy . . . he would buy her all sorts of things . . . and it would be absurd to come all this way for nothing; besides, whether he liked it or not, the little girl had got him by the scruff of the neck and he must see her. . . .

The kind-looking woman with grizzled hair, dark eyes, and a large white apron, who opened the door, smiled at him with approval. She showed him into the sitting-room; it faced the sea; on the right were the high hills and the wonderful vegetation. Books—books that were good to read—covered one side of the room; there was a piano, and comfy chairs and cushions. Joyce sat with her back to the window and had not seen him coming—the inevitable afternoon tea was set out, a covered muffin dish was on the fender; for, though the weather was soft and warm, there were still lingering spells of cold. She had been reading, a book was on her knees—a slender comfortable little figure in an easy chair. She rose with a sound of happy surprise. "Oh," she held out her hands.

"Did you think I would come?"

"I didn't know. . . ."

"You look so much better, so different—I could bless Mrs. Thornton," he said when he had been given tea and food from the covered dish.

"I bless her every day—many times," she answered. "I told you I had been beating with my hands at the door of a different part of the world—she gave me the key to it. . . . Isn't it beautiful here. Let us go out—there are hills and zigzag pathways up them and a rushing river through a wood in a valley."

"Take me at once," he laughed—for sheer joy at her manner.

While she put on her hat, and a wrap round her throat—they were on a peg outside the room—he picked up the book she had been reading. "Kipling—do you like him?" he asked as they went outward and turned to the left—past the harbor and the cliff railway.

She nodded. "He has seen how beautiful the world is—and he is so tender."

"He can be pretty fierce."

"Only because he can't bear the things that are done to spoil it—he loves it so—and he hates the things that people have to suffer when they might be so happy."

They strolled on to the little promenade. It was just a new road beside the sea with a new sea wall, on its opposite side was one of the wonderful wooded heights. It was all still in the making, and ended, after a quarter of a mile, in chaos and great slabs of blasted rock—Joyce had climbed over them often in the past weeks, down to the last stone that was safe, and counted the incoming waves. . . .

He looked at her—the slender girl he loved walking by his side, and he was happier than he had been for years—in his whole life, perhaps. He faced it squarely. He had never seen her in a hat before—it fitted close, yet allowed strands of fair hair to escape, and he could see the content in her blue eyes. They hardly spoke till they stopped and stood leaning over the wall, listening to the splash of the waves beneath. "It's so heavenly," she said with a long-drawn sigh; "if people could all live in beautiful places they would never be wicked."

"I think they might try," he answered cynically. "I am afraid they do."

"But they are good and kind naturally," she answered; "it's only when they are cruelly treated that they give back to the world the pain they have suffered—I think that's how it was with mother." The tears came to her eyes. "I can't bear to think that I didn't love her—I try to tell her so in my thoughts—sometimes I think she knows—and is glad I am here. . . ."

They heard a clock strike in the distance. He waited a minute before he spoke.

"Why did you say you couldn't marry me?"

"You only pitied me, that was why you asked me. I thought it would be dreadful for you," she had turned her face away.

"My dear—" he began.

"I felt it when you kissed me."

He laughed at that. "Did any one ever kiss you before?" he asked, just as a joke.

"Yes."

He could hardly believe his ears. "Who was it?"

"I don't know, I never saw him again—it was after a dance at the hydro in Wales—we went out to the garden after the waltz, and just before we went in—it was dark and I didn't dream what he was going to do, he kissed me and said: 'I believe I could fall in love with you—'"

"And then?"

"And then we hurried in—I never saw him again—I was dreadfully ashamed. . . . I am glad I have told you—what will you think of me?" She put her cool hands to her face.

"You blessed innocent, I love you for telling me—say you'll marry me."

She looked up, and then away from him. "When you kissed me," she said in a low voice, "I knew that you were not in love with me—it was so different."

"But I am, dear," he protested. "It has been growing on me every day—since I saw you last—you are simply the world to me."

"And you to me," she whispered. She turned toward him then, unconsciously rejoicing in his tallness and the strength of the arm that held her. Luckily the twilight had deepened, and not a soul was in sight. It was just as well.

"I think I have outdone that impudent beggar in the garden," he said at last. "I must go back to-morrow, but in a month, when I get my Easter leave, I shall carry you off." He kept his word.